# Frontier Issues in Cultural Memory Research. Translation from Russian[1]

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## Abstract

This article explores the application of the concept of the *frontier* to the study of the spatial dynamics of cultural memory. The author traces the evolution of spatial methodology within memory studies, identifying three successive stages: spatial, network-based, and flow-oriented. The spatial stage is marked by the homogeneity of collective memory; the network stage reveals the discreteness and heterogeneity of mnemonic configurations; and the flow stage enables an analysis of the interweaving of memorial practices linked to diverse cultural contexts. The conceptual shift from memory as a static condition to memory as a nonlinear, multilayered process necessitates a rethinking of the *frontier* category. This shift entails a rejection of geographic determinism, allowing border zones to be understood not only as specific territories but also as symbolic constructs—images of cultural memory that become sites of both encounter and confrontation between competing strategies of relating to the past. Within a flow-oriented methodological framework, the frontier is characterized by mobility and relationality, as its contours are defined by the claims of particular collective subjects to specific mnemonic representations. This property becomes especially salient in the context of a contemporary mobile society, marked by the interpenetration of various communities, such as migrants and indigenous populations.

## Keywords

Cultural Memory; Frontier; Border; Spatial Methodology; Network; Flow



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# Проблематика фронтира в исследованиях культурной памяти. Перевод с русского языка[1]

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## Аннотация

В статье анализируется применение понятия «фронтир» к изучению пространственной динамики культурной памяти. Автор рассматривает эволюцию пространственной методологии в “memory studies”, выявляя пространственную, сетевую и потоковую стадии. Пространство характеризуется однородностью коллективных воспоминаний, сеть позволяет выявить дискретность и гетерогенность культурной памяти, а поток делает возможным анализ переплетения мемориальных практик, отсылающих к различным культурным контекстам. Сдвиг понимания памяти от статичного состояния к нелинейному и многослойному процессу приводит к переосмыслению категории «фронтир». Происходит отказ от географического детерминизма, в результате чего пограничными зонами могут называться не только определенные территории, но и образы культурной памяти, которые становятся точками соприкосновения и противостояния различных стратегий обращения к прошлому. Фронтир в рамках потоковой методологии характеризуется подвижностью и реляционностью, поскольку его конкретные очертания устанавливаются претензиями тех или иных коллективных субъектов на конкретные мемориальные образы. Это свойство отчетливо проявляется в условиях формирования современного мобильного общества, в котором происходит взаимопроникновение различных сообществ, например, мигрантов и коренного населения.

## Ключевые слова

культурная память; фронтир; граница; пространственная методология; сеть; поток



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## Cultural Memory: From Network to Flows

In recent decades, cultural memory studies have become one of the most dynamically developing fields within the humanities and social sciences, as evidenced by the gradual institutionalization of *memory studies* both in the global academic community and in Russian scholarship. Despite a well-established lineage of intellectual predecessors and canonical figures—including Émile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Aby Warburg—the methodological foundations of the field remain far from unified. At the practical level, this is reflected in the growing number of studies where memory—qualified as "collective," "social," "historical," or "cultural"—becomes a universal term, often replacing a whole spectrum of concepts, from tradition to culture.

Rogers Brubaker (2012) identified several specific critiques of contemporary memory studies:

1. The difficulty of finding a "golden mean" between two extremes: on the one hand, it is overly broad interpretations of memory that make it synonymous with all historical phenomena; on the other, — a narrowing of the research field to the analysis of isolated cases without any attempt at theoretical generalization. The need for "middle-range theory" (in Robert Merton's terms) arises from the imperative to delineate the specificity of memory studies, which otherwise risks disappearing: either by collapsing into neopositivist micro-history or by dissolving into the vastness of the philosophy of history.

2. The necessity of abandoning radical constructivism in the interpretation of cultural memory. The realism–constructivism dichotomy was embedded in memory studies even before their formal emergence, largely because Maurice Halbwachs—the first to articulate the concept explicitly—was a follower of the positivist tradition, which shaped his approach significantly. He considered the distortive nature of memory to be important primarily as a means of separating "the wheat from the chaff"—namely, the false image of the past from its authentic reconstruction, which he saw as the goal of any historical inquiry (Halbwachs, 2007, pp. 120–122). This epistemological stance did not prevent Halbwachs from anticipating many future research directions and raising the question of whether "pure" history, free from the distortions of human memory, is possible at all.

The backlash against a long-dominant realism produced a surge in constructivist approaches to cultural memory, which radically reinterpreted the positivist foundations of the field. Rather than opposing memory to history, constructivist thinkers claimed the complete disappearance of the past, which survives only in the form of recollections shaped by political or cultural influences. Such an approach, however, tended to disregard the structural patterns through which representations of the past are formed, even less so their complex relation to actual events, and the ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological frames that sustain certain memories and enable a sense of continuity.

3. The overestimation of cultural memory's role in socio-political processes. As empirical practice shows, public statements rarely reflect the actual dynamics of interaction among social groups. Therefore, any claim about the influence of past representations on the present configuration of social space must be empirically substantiated. Otherwise, there is a risk of transforming narrow debates among professional historians into broad national discussions—not about the past itself, but about the present condition of society (Brubaker, 2012, p. 32).

It is for this reason that the call—voiced several years ago—for both a clearer definition of the research object and a significant narrowing of the field of inquiry appears fully justified. This includes abandoning the excessive psychologization of memory and reducing the term to a set of social practices aimed at maintaining or reconstructing specific images of the past (Olick & Robbins, 1998, pp. 105–140). Such a shift has led to the emergence of the so-called "third wave" of memory studies, which seeks to distance itself not only from the influence of psychologists and historians, but—somewhat paradoxically—from the founding figures of memory studies themselves, whose methodological approaches are now perceived as outdated.

What, then, are the key principles underpinning this new understanding of memory research? According to Yu. A. Safronova (2018, pp. 29–30), these include transdisciplinarity, rejection of Eurocentrism, and an attempt to construct a unified methodology for studying memorial practices as processes through which the meanings of the past are transformed.

At this juncture, philosophy plays a crucial role in supporting the work of social scientists such as sociologists and political theorists. Here, the logic of scholarly subordination is organized as a movement from the general to the particular: from the development of overarching theoretical frameworks to the search for concrete methodologies capable of confirming or falsifying theoretically postulated claims.

In this context, the transformation of the spatial approach to memory becomes particularly significant. The foundations of this approach can be traced back to the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who employed the metaphor of "frameworks of memory" to describe the social and psychological boundaries that delimit the transformation of images of the past.

The fragmentation of traditional communities in the context of massification and informatization of social reality has led to the erosion of homogeneous and immutable "frameworks of memory" as a viable methodological tool in social research. Memory itself begins to be understood, following Pierre Nora, as a collection of disparate "sites of memory"—a shift that fundamentally alters how we conceptualize the boundaries of memory. These boundaries now appear as fluid and are defined, in essence, by the particular assemblage of *lieux de mémoire* that are deemed central to a given community (Nora, 1999, pp. 18–22).

A key feature of the network model of cultural memory is its focus on the connections that allow individual representations of the past to be articulated in the consciousness of a member of a specific community. However, this

model also faces methodological limitations when it comes to studying the development and transformation of cultural memory.

The network model of memory has its limits, as the identity of any given object is defined by the preservation of a "core of stable relations"—that is, a set of connections between individual nodes in the network. The removal of any one of these nodes leads to a shift in the functional or symbolic meaning of the object. However, this limitation holds only as long as we conceptualize memory in terms of discrete and bounded entities, treating dynamism as an external force that ultimately disrupts the stability of the object under investigation. If, instead, we recognize dynamism as an immanent feature of all phenomena—so that the phenomenon itself must be understood not as an object but as a process—then the inclusion or exclusion of particular connections no longer plays a decisive role in identification.

As V. S. Vakhstein*[1] (2006, p. 29) notes,

> "what constitutes a rupture of form in the space of networks is no longer a rupture in a different topological system, described by John Law, namely in the space of flows. In this space, the transformation of relations is a necessary condition for the constitution of the object."

The flow model of cultural memory allows for change to be understood as an intrinsic feature of memory itself—especially within the context of a contemporary mobile society, where cultural boundaries are increasingly blurred and multiple forms of identity can coexist without contradiction. In this context, the very concept of community is redefined. The process of constructing cultural memory, initially seen as a means of legitimizing and consolidating collective identity, becomes at the same time a process of transforming the community itself. The relationship between the collective and its representations of the past becomes reciprocal: on the one hand, the community constructs its own memory; on the other, already-formed representations of the past cease to correspond precisely to the contours of the community and acquire a logic of autonomous existence.

In this sense, the mnemonic community—as opposed to Jan Assmann's model or institutional theories—does not necessarily coincide with clearly defined institutional or social boundaries. As D. Wierch (2018, pp. 15–32) has argued, similarities in the interpretation of the past may emerge among members of vastly different communities, and for diverse reasons. Moreover, the community itself ceases to function as a stable social unit, acquiring what might be called *liquid sociality*—a condition defined by the constant transformation of its boundaries and internal composition, yet retaining discrete forms of relationality and flexible modes of identification.

This flexibility manifests in the individual's liminal state, wherein the continuity of belonging to a particular community becomes a matter of cognitive orien-

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tation, while the objective contours of that community may shift significantly. For this reason, the concept of the *frontier* becomes particularly relevant in describing contemporary memorial practices.

## The Frontier in the Context of the Flow Model of Cultural Memory

The frontier, as an element of spatial description of reality, has been implicitly present in memory studies from the outset, functioning as a marker of liminal zones where collective memory undergoes dissolution and symbolic recoding. A significant influence in this context stems from the intellectual history of the term "frontier," which was first introduced by Frederick J. Turner in his analysis of the American West as a shifting boundary between barbarism and civilization (Turner, 1921, pp. 5–6). Yet even in the early 20th century, the frontier was conceptualized not only as a geographic marker but also as a symbolic construct—a territory in which normative legal and moral frameworks typical of the cultural center are suspended, and where the very environment of the frontier operates as a "melting pot" for the formation of hybrid cultural identities.

> "Despite a certain degree of geographic determinism (the presence or absence of natural barriers, landscape features, etc.), the frontier is better understood as a marker of the spheres of influence of different social groups. It functions not as an impermeable boundary but rather as a heterogeneous layer, a buffer zone between diverging cultures. If the boundary stems from the archaic opposition of the sacred and the profane, the frontier instead signals a decentralized and diffuse social space with no rigid segmentation" (Anikin, 2015, p. 12).

Thus, the frontier becomes transformed from a geographic notion into a significant category within contemporary memory studies, as it allows to speak of overlapping, fragmented memorial practices that accumulate in palimpsestic layers. In a context of misaligned political, social, and symbolic boundaries, the frontier emerges as both a site of "memory wars"—triggered by competing claims of different communities to shared *lieux de mémoire*—and a buffer zone that generates hybrid forms of memorial practice.

The condition of the memorial frontier is characterized by the presence of specific images of the past that are incorporated into the mnemonic configurations of various communities, albeit occupying different structural positions. This pertains not only to semiotic variations of a single event (such as divergent interpretations of the Battle of Borodino's outcome), but also to how the public representation of one memory simultaneously produces a spatial redistribution of all others across multiple memorial locations.

In his theory of *network topology*, John Law refers to this kind of structural formation as a "method-assemblage," which he defines as follows:

> "A method assemblage is the enactment of relations that simultaneously shape, mediate, and separate an object here-and-now, its relevant context there-and-then,

and an indefinite range of other relations, processes, and elements which are part of the assemblage but disappear from it" (Law, 2015, p. 176).

From the perspective of actor-network theory, this operational repertoire exists as a methodological toolset within the researcher's "laboratory," a conceptual space for assembling links among diverse empirical or conceptual entities. Yet such a method, as exemplified by Law in his analysis of liver disease and alcohol-related organ damage (pp. 147–157), also proves highly applicable to the study of how representations of the past are mobilized for political purposes.

How, then, does the method-assemblage enable not only the production of specific images of the past, but also the identification of the absence of certain representations? John Law explains this process through a triadic distinction: *presence*, *manifest absence*, and *alterity*.

3) **Presence** refers to an effect enacted through specific procedures and social practices. As Law emphasizes, this effect is always a complex articulation of material objects and their representations. It is difficult to draw a strict line between the two, since even the simple naming of a historical fact already implies an interpretation embedded in a particular mnemonic tradition.

4) **Manifest absence** denotes the omission of elements that are expected within a given context of analysis. The very fact of such an absence implies intentionality and thus demands interpretation. This omission may stem either from a desire to avoid a seemingly "natural" frame of reference or from an effort to abstract from it due to specific strategic or ideological reasons. Law tends toward the former interpretation, writing: "The dissected vessels are linked to factors that caused the illness in the past and have consequences for how it may be treated in the future" (p. 177). In the context of cultural memory, however, the diachronic dimension of manifest absence becomes crucial: it presupposes historical antecedents and consequences that are situated within a shared cultural framework of causal logic. Presence, in this case, is enveloped within a cultural cocoon whose contours—that is, the range of acceptable forms of manifest absence—are determined solely by the community that constitutes the fact in question.

5) **Alterity** represents a different kind of absence: that which results from falling entirely outside of a given cultural framework. Alterity is always *there*, but it remains latent until the boundaries of the cultural context shift, turning what was previously invisible into a visible anomaly—a marked exception to the current configuration of presence.

This tripartite distinction can be illustrated through a simple example of how memory is assembled (and reassembled) in relation to the Second World War, especially within contemporary social and political settings. On May 7, 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense released a presentation titled *Victory in Europe Day: A Time of Celebration, Reflection*, which attributed the defeat of Nazi Germany

exclusively to the United States and its allies, particularly emphasizing the opening of the "Second Front" in 1944 (Victory in Europe Day, 2020). In this case:

1) Presence is established through the mention of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France in the context of victory.
2) Manifest absence is represented by the omission of the Soviet Union's role in this event, despite its central place in established commemorative traditions.
3) Alterity is reflected in the absence of countries such as Papua New Guinea or Zimbabwe, which are not expected to appear in the mnemonic framework of Second World War commemoration and thus remain culturally invisible.

The boundary between manifest absence and alterity constitutes a kind of *mnemonic frontier*. As the borders of a mnemonic community—understood as the subject of collective memory—shift, certain images of the past may migrate from the domain of collective unconsciousness into the space of symbolic competition. The frontier thus marks the moment where these migrations occur and where absent elements begin to contend for visibility within the contested politics of memory.

## Mnemonic Adaptation under Frontier Conditions: Achievements and Limits of Communitarianism

The potential risk and conflict-generating nature of the mnemonic frontier underscores the importance of developing strategies for managing symbolic conflicts—particularly in situations where the so-called "memory wars" may escalate into real social tensions. One of the most illustrative examples of such escalation is the interaction between indigenous populations and migrant communities. In today's mobile society, these interactions have become normalized, shifting from extraordinary occurrences to a constant element of everyday life. This is the paradox of the mnemonic frontier: the individual finds themselves in a liminal zone not because of physical or social displacement, but because the space of their habitual relations is itself in flux (Anikin, 2020, pp. 66–72). The frontier becomes a mode of existence for the contemporary subject, thereby generating specific demands for cultural competencies—such as the capacity to adapt to continually shifting conditions and boundaries of community life. Within this context, *mnemonic adaptation* plays a critical role.

Mnemonic adaptation refers to the process by which individual and collective memories of migrants are integrated into the cultural memory structure of the host community with the aim of forming hybrid identities. However, such hybrid identity should not be regarded as the ultimate goal of mnemonic adaptation, but rather as an important intermediate stage toward mitigating or resolving conflicts between native and migrant populations.

A key precondition for mnemonic adaptation is the recognition of the local community as a subject of cultural memory. This refers not to "community" as a synonym for any social group, but to a collective of individuals united by shared social practices—understood here as a potential mechanism for overcoming mnemonic wars and conflicts.

It is therefore not surprising that a philosophical response to the extreme pluralization and individualization of identity has been the emergence of communitarianism, as developed by thinkers such as Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer. Of the principles of the French Revolution, communitarians were most drawn to *fraternity*, which they saw as an antidote to both socialist egalitarianism and liberal individualism. On a theoretical level, communitarianism asserts the importance of social context in shaping personal values, emphasizing that even those who champion radical individualism do so only because such ideas have been internalized through socialization—most often via their immediate environment (Etzioni, 2004, pp. 13–15).

According to communitarian theorists, abstract global entities such as the state or the nation—entities that must necessarily produce generalized and impersonal memorial practices—are increasingly being displaced by local practices, generated by specific communities and imbued with moral significance for those who recognize themselves as members of these communities.

The reliance on communitarian values significantly reshapes the temporal coordinates of social life, as it enables a shift in emphasis—not merely from the past to the present, but from the past to the future. As Émile Durkheim already observed, every community requires a set of shared memories that must be periodically actualized through collective ritual. However, the very existence of such rituals presupposes a consciously articulated functional orientation. In other words, communities perform rituals in order to remain communities; they do not preserve their identity simply to have a reason to perform rituals. Rituals play an auxiliary role—they serve to reinforce solidarity within an already constituted collective, which in turn implies that the origins of the community must lie elsewhere. For rituals to emerge, the *community* must already exist.

As Amitai Etzioni (2012) argues, "a community affects both the initial personal preferences and, to a significant degree, changes in these preferences. The internalization of values through such communal processes as moral education, persuasion, and leadership reshapes the forms of initial preferences just as powerfully as does the passage of time" (p. [insert page if known]).

This understanding allows us to refine the concept of mnemonic adaptation. It is not aimed at adjusting one social group to another—whether that be migrants adapting to the host society, or vice versa—but rather at constructing a hybrid identity within a specific *local community*. The focus thus shifts from assimilation to coformation, from adjustment to shared belonging within a culturally situated and socially negotiated mnemonic framework.

It is important to recognize that such identity does not entail a mechanical aggregation of disparate images of the past—each significant to a particular community—into a relatively coherent narrative. First, because the coherence of such a narrative will always remain highly relative; and second, because the issue of the dominance of certain memory-images, even within an ostensibly shared discursive framework, continues to serve as a source of potential social fragmentation.

A representative case is the celebration of Victory Day in the Russian Federation, which, according to all sociological surveys, remains one of the most important public holidays for Russian citizens (Levada-Center[1]*, 2019). However, employing Victory Day as a mechanism of mnemonic adaptation for migrants from the former Soviet republics rests on the presumption that the mnemonic frameworks of these countries align—at least at key symbolic junctures—with Russia's commemorative space. If, however, we acknowledge that transformations in cultural memory inevitably lead to the symbolic recoding of dates inherited from the Soviet past, then it becomes evident that the use of Victory Day as a source of symbolic consolidation often reveals the limitations of the official discourse.

In the context of local communities, national commemorative practices tend to narrow the potential for overcoming internal divisions and for building genuine social consensus.

What is required, therefore, is the construction of a new local narrative—one oriented not toward the restoration of a "lost past," but toward the creation of an envisioned future. In this regard, cultural memory within the conditions of a contemporary mobile society is not only characterized by a state of constant fluidity, but also by a shift in orientation: from the past to the future, from historicism to futurism.

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